No Happy Ending for Abel Green as “The Snitch” from *Freight: The Five Incarnations of Abel Green*

by

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Artistic Aims

African Americans have had one of the biggest impacts on American history. By taking on the role of Abel Green and various other characters in Howard L. Craft’s *Freight: The Five Incarnations of Abel Green*, I am shining light on one of the most impactful group of people in African American history. This role will be challenging because it isn’t the type of character, I’ve grown accustomed to playing. I want the audience to connect to the characters by feeding their emotions through Abel Green. I want them to walk away thinking about and telling others the effect it had on them.

Many people are ignorant to what went on in the past, and this creates more confusion about what currently goes on in our society today. History repeats itself and if we, as people, are more knowledgeable about what happened in the past then we can avoid recurring conflicts and will be able to do better for the communities throughout America. One of the biggest impacts in American history was the existence of the Black Panther Party. In journey of how Abel Green is given the opportunity to start a new life by becoming an FBI informant after getting in trouble with the law. Through my portrayal of this character, I hope the audience will have a desire to research and educate themselves on what the Blank Panther Party is and their impact on our history.

As a theatrical actor, one of my biggest challenges is opening my body to an audience as an abstract character. I tend to be closed off and not completely in use of my whole self while performing. In Ronni Stewart’s Movement for Performers I class, I found out how I can add to my performance by becoming a part of the space the character is in. This making my stage
presence more known. She supplied me with tools to make stronger movements across the stage as well as being mindful of the surrounding space. Supplying this knowledge to my craft will come in handy when figuring out blocking onstage. This will construct an authentic playing space use her techniques to my full advantage and utilize them to overcome this struggle.

Another challenge is to conquer my fear of being a solo performer. This will be my first time performing alone. Getting over this obstacle will help to increase my growth as an actor overall. The protagonist, Abel Green, takes on a lot of emotions while telling his story on this train ride. Carrying all the emotional baggage and effectively articulating would be tough to grasp. With the help from Joseph Hetterly's Voice and Speech Essentials class, this will be slightly less hard to execute. I learned various breathing and oral techniques that will help me to effectively alter my voice while still being able to be clearly heard onstage.

On this journey with Abel Green, I will be depicting four different characters. I hope to create each character with their own clear, unique and distinctive traits so there is no confusion between who is talking at each moment. Although this is challenging, these characterizations will help me to become more versatile as an actor. Switching between characters without a change in scenery will be a bit tough. This will be a bit nerve-racking but, will help me to build more confidence in myself as a performer as I go on.

Another thing I hope to accomplish is to teach a lesson about life; no one knows what tomorrow holds. We all wake up blind to what's bound to happen in the future. Most of the time, we tend to plan out our lives in hopes of knowing what the outcome will be when in reality, we don't. In Freight, Abel Green thought he could get a second chance at a new beginning by gathering information about the Panthers; however, this was not the case. A series of unexpected events happen that are out of his control led him to having the completely opposite of what he expected.
My senior project will take my solo performing skills to the next level towards making me a strong performer in the future. After graduating, I plan on inventing or being a part of more solo performance projects. I feel like they can influence other to share stories about their lives or even have something to relate to in an aspect to not feel alone. I hope the audience members, especially POC were able to be informed about our history and become more curious about how ancestors along with the sacrifices they have made.

As a minority, I understand the importance of representation. Much of our history can be belittled at times. Even here at school, there aren’t many courses in the program here that educate us more stories that can relate to our culture. The Black Panther Party was a demonstration of how we can come together to make a difference in the world; shining light on the importance of staying together to build and fight for equality in the ongoing race war.

The Black Panther Party was and still is a prominent group of Civil Rights activists in African American history. I want to show Purchase what it is to be black in America. With this school being the home to a diverse group of students, stories about black history need to be more welcomed and brought to the stage. We all come different backgrounds and our differences are often celebrated. As an actor, the diversity was greatly appreciated because it exposed me to a variety of different characters that I can study for future references. Although we are all celebrated, I don’t think the black community gets enough exposure. By taking on this role, I felt an obligation to represent my black brothers and sisters.

This play can have a positive impact on my audience and community. Many people will leave learning something they may have not known before. By playing Abel Green and the other three characters, my audience will experience a wave of emotions. The words may make the play become intense, but it will only help the audience understand what was going on in America at this time. I want the audience to understand the story of a man who was given a freedom or
incarceration scenario, and how this is common with many criminals. I hope they will leave understanding that many detectives and lawyers utilize informants to incarcerate others. I also want them to understand that the FBI was using the informants to turn minorities against each other in hopes of destroying the Panther Party.

Although many people view snitches as bad people, I want the audience to understand why Abel Green chose to snitch. He went down a path thinking it could erase his problems. He had a good job to be a spy, had a woman whom he fell in love with and was started to regret sneaking information from the Panthers after realizing what they were about. It isn’t always easy to decide when on the fence of either jail or becoming a rat. I hope the audience will empathize with him and understand that as a black man in America’s system it is better to be a free man than an incarcerated one.
My senior project experience was a production to remember. From initially struggling to find a project during junior seminar, to dropping from a project, to landing on a beautiful play like *Freight* in limited time was quite hectic but satisfying. Working on this project was like a pain that ended up feeling great to conquer. This was my first time ever being on the producing side while acting. It was an interestingly stressful job to take on being that it was a solo performance. There were many times I almost felt like I couldn’t get it done but my small production team and I kept pushing forward. Setting aside so much time to make this project happen showed me how much time and energy must be dedicated when putting up a solo performance show.

I initially was an actor in another senior project, but I dropped it due to dissatisfaction with the director’s artistic vision. After dropping it my mind went into a state of panic because I thought I wasn’t going to able to find a new project to be a part of. My senior project advisor Imani Douglas suggested that I do Howard L. Craft’s *Freight: The Five Incarnations of Abel Green*. After taking time to read over the script, I instantly fell in love and agreed to do it. Then I ran into another problem, I needed a production team. I was able to receive help from Arthur Night who agreed to take on the role as the director for my project and Maya Robinson to design my costume.

Arthur and I began the creative process by analyzing who this character Abel Green is. We drew conclusions on things like his background. To know where he came from helped me understand what type of role I was taking on. We did this for the other characters as well.
One of the artistic challenges that I hoped to overcome during this production was taking on the role of four different characters during a solo performance. The conversations Arthur and I had helped me understand what is was exactly I needed to do. The characters each needed to have distinctive voices and body language to give the clarity of which character is speaking. The provided the audience to know I was taking on more than one role.

The four roles that I had to take on were Mary, William Benson, Frank, and Abel Green. We discovered different personalities for each of them. Mary was a strong intellectual woman who would grab the room’s attention when she spoke. William Benson was more of a business like man that seemed like he knew all the answers to life problems. Frank was a stern guy who was looking to educate a brother whenever the opportunity presented itself. Abel Green was a troubled man who was seeking freedom. The beautiful thing about these characters is that they reminded me of a few of my family members. Being able to compare them to my relatives made it fun to mimic and build these characters.

Another artistic challenge I overcome during my production was the fear of being a solo performer. After the first night, my fears went out of the windows. The energy I felt from the audience helped me conquer my fear. I didn’t mess up or stumble on my words like I initially thought I would have. It was my first time performing alone and a lot of pressure was on my shoulders but getting over this obstacle helped me feel more confident as a performer and continuing to grow.

During rehearsals, I constantly found myself stuttering and messing up my words. This hindered my ability to articulate and execute what it was I was trying to say. All the way up until the last rehearsal, which was the night before opening night, I started to go back into old habits. I then had to refer to the tools and practices I learned in Joseph Hetterly’s Voice and Speech
Essentials class. However, I still found myself stumbling on my words. This made me nervous for the production because I was the only one on stage, and if I messed up it would be quite easy for the blame to fall on me. Surprisingly, I didn’t stutter during any of my performances. I can thank the audience for that because the energy I received from them helped me calm my nerves.

Given that we had limited time and a small production team, we ran into difficulties when it came to the set design. Arthur and I explored different styles for the train set. We finally agreed on going in a minimalist direction. We used a total of four chairs and a pole to represent a train setting. We also used sounds of a train so the audience can understand where we were. By using a small set design, it helped bring out the space more to allow more room for movement and blocking.

An artistic challenge that I overcame as an actor during my production was opening my body to the audience as an abstract character. By going in a minimalist direction with the set, it allowed me to have more space to move around. During my performance I was more open with my body. I utilized the tools and practices I learned in Ronni Stewart’s Movement for Performers I class. I became a part of the space I was in. This enhanced my stage presence which grasped the audience attention from the second I entered the stage. I made sure to be mindful of the surrounding space, which constructed an authentic playing space. By being more opening I allowed myself to overcome my struggle of closing my body while performing. This will help me with future productions I hope to take on during my post-Purchase acting career.

We had a small amount of time to pull this production together. This led to us having little room to raise money. Our budget was quite small, we only spent $50 in total. All the money went towards the costume design that was created with the help of costume designer Maya Robison and my professor Imani Douglas. We pulled together an all-black prideful look that was perfect
for my role. The costume displayed fashion that was common during the black Panther Party era. This helped my audience understand who Abel Green was. In addition, the all black also represented neutrality. I had no time for a costume change, and I needed something that was perfect enough to take on different characters. The all black was the perfect fit.

Before my performance, I sat down and thought about what it was exactly that I want the audience to take away from my performance. Not only did I want to perform exceptionally well so that people talked about it. I wanted people to leave with a message. An important message that I hoped people would leave my performance was the importance of history, specifically African American history. My take on the role of a man who was an informant for the FBI and joined the Black Panther Party, I was able to have my audience leave with the question of who they were and why they were important. I know I was able to achieve this by the amount of people who came up to me and talked about it. My Grandfather came up to me and told me how proud he was that I took on this role because it made people want to educate themselves on important figures in history. Hearing him tell me this made me realize that my message resonated with my audience.

My grandfather wasn’t the only one who came up to me after my performance. I was lucky enough to have over 25 family members and friends come out to support me that weekend. It was as very warm and welcoming experience to know they loved it and had my back throughout my production process. It was the first time many of them seen me perform on stage, and their feedback made me happy. This performance became the thing to talk about with my family. They were immediately sending me advertisements for auditions and agents that i should try and look out for. Although they don’t have much knowledge on theater, it was greatly appreciated to have this support.
Overall, my experience with this production was wonderful to say the least. It was bittersweet to do the last performance because I knew it was coming to an end. I am grateful to have this experience and add it on to my resume. I enjoyed my time rehearsing and performing. This production demonstrated my capabilities as an actor and helped me to recognize what I can improve upon. The small amount of time I had to put this production together mad me realize anything is possible. In the end it came out better than I thought it would. This production and the knowledge I gained at Purchase will help me with my future endeavors, and for that I am forever grateful.
Howard L. Craft’s Freight: *The Five Incarnations of Abel Green* tells the story of five versions of a black man in different eras of America. A minstrel, cult leader, FBI informant, struggling actor, out-of-work mortgage broker each find their way as they are striving to make an honest living. Each man was confronted by a man named William Benson who would be able to help change his way of life. Focusing on the FBI informant in “The Snitch”, Abel Green meets William Benson, an FBI informant, who fills him in about a group that is supposedly a dangerous threat to the nation. Green was given a deal to either go to jail or become a rat gathering information from the revolutionary group called the Black Panther Party. After choosing to become a snitch, he ended up having mixed emotions about his decision. He finds out the truth of what the Panthers were about, started to like all the good they were doing for the black community and falls in love with one of the revolutionaries named Mary. When Abel Green finds out all this information, he starts to take precaution in order to protect himself and his new found love. Benson promises that he would let him know when things when the attack will happen. Unfortunately, this promise was broken immediately leaving Green on the run while fighting for his life.

During the Black Panther era, the FBI sent an informant like Abel Green to get insight on the party’s activities. The need for informants leads to the question of whether the Black Panther Party was truly a danger to America or not. It is important to gather information and examine the truth behind this question but the Black Panther party was there to help the black community or to bring danger.
The Black Panthers were formed as a direct result of the civil rights movement. After various violent activities the activist group, the Black Panther Party, was categorized as a terrorist group by the FBI. However, the violence was brought upon as a mechanism to defend themselves. Similar to other activist groups that fought against what they believed is wrong within their governmental system, the Black Panthers had to face their challenges and in return turned to violence when the party was threatened. They had an “aggressive” look to them which became a threat to many racist whites. The Black Panthers were out for change within their communities and found various ways to protect it as well. The commonly known way was with the right to bear arms.

Placing a group of fanatical people together can lead to terrorism. Terrorism can be defined as the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims. The Black Panther Party was formed in 1966 by two civil right activists, during the height of the civil rights movement, in Oakland, California. The two activists, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, wanted change within the American Government, and wanted to fight against the oppression of people of color (Zalman). The group had fanatical tendencies in which they would use guns to fight against police brutality. They had multiple violent interactions with the police whenever they rallied to fight for black power. Being that they were using violence to fight for what they believe is right, within their eyes, conveys how they may be considered terrorist group.

The Panthers fought for more than desegregation, which was the major issue at the time of their formation. The Panthers recognized that people of color were the largest racial group that was living in poverty. This being unfair to the Panthers; their first mission was to help bring better conditions to the black community. The Panthers were one of the first to realize that the civil rights movement were worried more about the integration of blacks and whites more than
the well-being of black neighborhoods. The financial problems that people of color face were the main motivation behind the Panthers wanting to fight for a change. Their goals were shown in a 10-point plan, which included needs for freedom, housing, employment, and education (Wood). This shows how the Panthers had higher concerns in the civil rights movement that fought for change, and they shouldn’t be seen as a terrorist group.

The Black Panthers were first recognized on May 2, 1967. Multiple, armed Black Panther members entered the California legislature to protest the idea of outlawing the first amendment right of citizens to bear arms. No violence took place on this day because they weren’t attacked by police, which shows that the fanatical group of activists didn’t always turn to violence to fight for what they want. Although they carried guns, they didn’t wound anyone. The guns were used as an example as to why citizens should have the right to bear arms. They wanted to keep the right to bear arms as a way of protecting themselves from the police (Workneh). This was during a time when police would kill certain people of color with no reasoning behind the murder. This event was the first time the group was recognized by the Government and was seen as a threat. This was one of their first moments fighting for what they believe is right without violence. It illustrates how they aren’t terrorist because terrorist usually use violence to prove their beliefs.

The Panthers monitored the violence of the police. In 1966, police violence was at a peak so the Panthers ventured out to protect people of color by having armed members go out while police arrested people. They would stand back in watch just in case the police tried to take advantage. One of the founding members, Huey Newton, said it was “to make sure there was no brutality,” (Wood). During one time while they were monitoring, they witnessed a police officer stop and frisk a man. The Panthers got out of their car and went over and stood watching with their guns in their hands. This intimidated the officer causing him to question the members and
try to put fear in them in return. One of the founding members, Huey Newton, was able to quote every law that was relevant to the situation. (Wood) This situation exemplifies how the party was prepared to protect the community from the police at any given moment.

Although the Panthers originally came together to fight against police brutality in Oakland, California, the group did various things within the black community to help develop it. After the expansion of the party, the group began to focus on more positive things that will impact their communities. They didn’t want their war against the police to be the only focal point of their legacy. They launched more than 35 survival programs. They provided services for things such as education, tuberculosis testing, legal aid, transportation assistance, ambulance service, and the manufacture and distribution of free shoes (Duncan). Providing these programs to help the community shows how the party used their power for positive things.

One of their most effective services that they provided was their breakfast program. They provided free breakfast for school children in the local neighborhood. The program began in January 1969 at a church in Oakland. Similarly, to the party, the breakfast program grew at a fast rate among other party members in the nation. Members would buy the food, prepare it, and serve it to the children free of charge (Blakemore). Ruth Beckford, a church goer at one of the locations that provided the service, explained how principals came up to them and told them how their program helped the children. Beckford explained, “They weren’t falling asleep in class, they weren’t crying with stomach cramps.” (Blakemore) This conveys the influence programs like this had on the community. It showed how the party wanted to take on more positive tasks for the benefit of their communities.

The services provided by the Black Panther Party was provided in all the cities that the party had activists in. One of these cities, Chicago, had a remarkable impact on its community.
Fred Hampton was the leader of the Chicago Black Panther Party. Along with the help from other members and people from the community, Hampton lead five breakfast programs, opened a free medical center, helped initiate tests for sickle cell anemia, and encouraged blood drives for a local hospital. They also attempted to end gang violence by showing them that the war wasn’t with their black brothers and sisters but with the police. Through these programs, the panthers showed that they were there for the benefit of enriching the black communities in America. Although the Panthers tried to clean up their image by helping others in their community, the FBI still wanted to get rid of them. They viewed the party as the greatest threat to America at the time.

The Black Panthers had various dangerous interactions with the police, which caused them to be seen as terrorists. Since their recognition by the government, between the years 1967 and 1968, the Black Panthers had numerous shootouts with the police. These events lead to deaths within both groups. These events gave the Black Panthers a reputation as extremist. As a justification behind these events, one of the Panther’s founder’s, Bobby Seale, said, “We do not fight racism with racism. We fight racism with solidarity. We do not fight exploitative capitalism with Black capitalism. We fight capitalism with basic socialism. And we do not fight imperialism with more imperialism. We fight imperialism with proletarian internationalism.” (Wood) This shows their mission was not to fight in retaliation of racism formed against them, but rather they fought as a way of justice. They would retaliate because of the brutality and aggression they experience from the police.

The Panthers used violence to get what they want, but they shouldn’t be considered as a terrorist group. On April 6, 1968, action was taken place between the Panthers and police for 90 minutes in one of the Black Panthers’ property. Both parties were armed, and it led to four
wounded police and one dead. This interaction also led to the death of the Panther member, Bobby Hutton by the police. (Zalman) The violence that took place was out of the Panthers trying to protect themselves from the police brutality. Using violence as a form of self-defense isn’t terrorizing others. They fought for what they believe in and had to protect themselves whenever it was necessary.

The police exerted violence on the Panthers just as much as the Panthers exerted on them. There were various occasions when the police brutalized the Panthers more than the Panther brutalized the police. On December 4, 1969, the FBI was investigating the Panthers and was given permission to raid the Illinois Black Panther Party’s leader, Fred Hampton, apartment. Two Panther members were murdered in the shootout. This event was remembered through the unfair firing of the guns by police. Police shot up to 99 bullets compared to the one bullet that the Panthers shot. One Panther witness, Deborah Johnson recalls, “One of the policemen grabbed my robe and threw it down and said ‘what do you know, we have a broad here.’ Another man grabbed me by the head and shoved me into the kitchen. I heard a voice from another part of the apartment saying, ‘he’s barely alive’, or ‘he’ll barely make it’. Then I heard more shots. A sister screamed from the front. Then the shooting stopped. I heard someone say, ‘he’s as good as dead now.’” (Wood)

If terrorism is to be defined as using violence to fight for what you want, then the police could be considered terrorists in this situation. Since the police aren’t considered terrorists, then the Panthers shouldn’t be seen as terrorists. The police used the gun shots as a way of defending their fears against the armed Panther members. This is similar to the Panthers usage of guns as a way of protecting themselves out of fear of being killed by police because of the color of their skin. The police have a history during the civil rights movement of killing
multiple activists, some armed some unarmed. This history may have put fear in the minds of the Panthers and forced them to protect themselves by bearing arms.

The Panthers were recognized by their violence against police, however they had other works that did helped further develop their communities. The Panthers had many other ventures that helped better their dominantly African American communities. They organized various community programs, like free breakfast, health clinics, and clothing for families in need. One of the founding members, Bobby Seale, said, “A lot of people misunderstand the politics of these programs; some people tend to call them reform programs. They’re not reform programs; they’re actually revolutionary community programs. A revolutionary program is onset forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system for a better system. A reform program is set up by the existing exploitative system as an appeasing handout, to fool the people and to keep them quiet. Examples of these programs are poverty programs, youth work programs and things like that” (Wood). This conveys how the programs were mainly made to better the African American community, rather than offering it just to avoid complaints. This shows how the Panthers weren’t always plotting how they can violently make change within America; they wanted to make their communities more enriched. These organizations exemplified how the Panthers were out to better the way in which the Black community gets better benefits that America didn’t have to offer during the time.

The FBI tried to make the Black Panthers be considered as a terrorist group and seen them as a “huge threat” to America when in reality they’re the real terrorists. Freight demonstrates this idea with the destruction done by William Benson against Abel Green. William Benson enabling Abel green to become an informant displays exactly how the Black Panther Party was forced into being seen as a ‘danger’ to society. The need for informants alone
drives this old FBI theory even though the panthers were trying to protect their neighborhoods.

The Black Panthers Party was an organization that was formed as a result of the civil rights movement to bring more protection to people of color as well as fighting for equality. They fought long and hard against police brutalization and did everything they can to uphold themselves. Their efforts, similar to popular activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, brought about change within the black community. The Panthers has shown how they can be a great role model for future generations when coming together for a cause. to seek guidance whenever they want to fight against what they believe is wrong in their society.
Work Cited


